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Allen W. Dulles

We have come some distance in our thinking about espionage and intelligence gathering from the day when it used to be thought (by others as well as Henry Stimson who is credited with the phrase) that gentlemen didn't read other people's mail. And Allen Dulles probably had more to do with this leap forward than any man. He was a gentleman, every inch, and he did believe in reading other people's mail, sometimes literally and sometimes by such unconventional techniques as U-2 aircraft, and we can be thankful that he did, and that there is no longer any serious argument about the need for this country to maintain a permanent, centralized peacetime secret intelligence agency. There will continue to be debate about how big it should be, and just what it should do, and who should oversee it, and at least some of this controversy can be credited to Mr. Dulles, too. He was passionate about his trade —and less so about his anonymity—and bold in the risks he took. And of course he made his share of mistakes, which in his line of work can be very serious. But he never flinched from trying the hard and thankless things that were often handed on to him because more conventional approaches hadn't worked. And although he left in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, which was the bad chapter, he left behind him an extraordinary monument.

Visitors to the CIA headquarters in McLean, Va. are told, in a Latin inscription on a plaque commemorating Allen Dulles, to look around the building for his monument, which is ironic, because what he left behind is nothing so tangible—some would say ostentatious—as that. It is the esprit, and the sense of dedication, and the self-respect, and the professionalism of the men and women who have brought a high standard of competence to American intelligence-gathering and analysis in large part because they were encouraged by the example of Allen W. Dulles to make it a career.

His own career is set forth elsewhere in today's editions. It is enough to note that he was a highly successful intelligence agent, in World War II, before he became the boss, and this gave him a head start with the working stiffs. It was sometimes said that he never got over being a working stiff himself, to the point of trying to run everything, but this was really a measure of his strength, which came from insatiable curiosity and endless energy and limitless excitement about his work. Just to begin with, he looked like a spy-master, a British spy-master, with the pipe, and the explosive laugh, and the professor's sharp eyes. He came to Washington for three months to give the CIA a careful study for President Truman and he wound up staying for 11 years and putting into practice reforms he had merely intended to recommend.

There is no way to measure his accomplishment; intelligence successes take the form of being prepared and there is nothing very dramatic about that; it is when we are caught short that CIA comes to public notice. But surely the U-2 flights, despite their bad ending, were an intelligence triumph, and one which was crucial, many think, to President Kennedy's success in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. And surely there were other triumphs, as well as failures, along the way, some losses as well as gains that you cannot see and would be hard put to evaluate if you could. Perhaps it is enough to say that he was a gentleman who did as much as any man to help his country understand the necessity in today's world of reading other people's mail, that he did it with integrity and great skill, and that on balance his country was measurably safer and more secure in a difficult and dangerous time for the fact that he was doing it.